

NOTES ON ISAIAH 38-39

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Connected with the narrative text in Isa 36-37, the chapters 38-39 contain the narrations concerning the illness of King Hezekiah. Like the narration in 36-37,¹ the text of Isa 38-39 itself already raises many questions of concern to the exegete. In this article, I would like, from a text-linguistic point of view (especially text-syntactic and text-semantic), to shed a new light on some of these for Isa 38-39, supported by some text-critical observations.

Much discussed is the sign, which Isaiah gives to Hezekiah in verse 8 as a support of the fact that the Lord will keep his word as to postponing the death of Hezekiah for fifteen years.² This sign is text-semantically framed in the story of Isa 38.

In the description of the sign, the word מַעֲלָה is used, which is formed from the root עָלָה by means of a ה-*preformativum* and which, therefore, must have the meaning of *something which goes up*, i.e. a step (*confer*: Ex 20:26; 1 Kings 10:19; Ez 40:6). Here, however, there is no reason to suppose a sundial, like the Targum that reads אֲבִן שַׁעִי, and the Vulgate that reads *in horologio*.³

The sign has to do with the wax (יָרַד) and wane (שָׁחַף / שָׁחַף) of the shadows cast on a step under the influence of the sun (שָׁחַף / שָׁחַף). Because of the fact that the more the sun sets, the longer the shadows are, the evening situation is described in the first half of verse 8, and, the other way round, the morning situation in the second half of verse 8. This means that, as surely as the morning follows upon the evening, recov-

¹ See my article BN 98 (1999) 32-35.

² The death of a king means discontinuity, whereas continuity in kingship is necessary to survive in the actual situation of the conflict with Sennacherib. From this point of view, it is striking that the text does not speak about Hezekiah's recovery, but about a limited recovery of fifteen years. See also: P.R. ACKROYD, *An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile. A Study of 2 King 20 / Isaiah 38-39*, SJTh 27 (1974) 345.

³ In the Septuagint (τοὺς δέκα ἀναβῆθιμοὺς τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ πατρὸς σου) and the Pešitta (כּוֹנֵן הַיּוֹם אֲבִן שַׁעִי), allusions to a sundial or sun-clock are missing as well. See also: D. BARTHÉLEMY, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament* (OBO 50/2), Fribourg — Göttingen 1986, 262. *Pace*: O. KEEL — CH. UEHLINGER, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole. Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen* (QD 134), Freiburg — Basel — Wien 1992, 310, who too easily assume a "Sonnenuhr" here in confirmation of the "solare Neuorientierung" in Judah.

cry / deliverance follows upon the crisis-situation of Hezekiah / Jerusalem.⁴ The indications of the evening and the morning occur again in the writing of Hezekiah. In the verses 12 and 13, Hezekiah describes his experiences using the temporal phrase מִיּוֹם עַד-לַיְלָה.

The first word of verse 12, דְּוֹר, contains an interpretation problem. Because it is parallel to the word אֹהֶל, it is generally translated with *tent* or a similar notion.⁵ In my opinion, creating a special meaning for only one occurrence, of such a current word as דְּוֹר, is neither wise nor necessary.⁶

The concept דְּוֹר means a collective of people, living during a certain time span. It concerns, therefore, not an individual lifespan, but the living community of Israel *in concreto*.⁷ This implies that Hezekiah does not write that his own life is ended, but that he describes how his people, over whom he is king, will be separated from him as a consequence of his death.⁸ In this way, it is again raised that an extra crisis threatens to come into being, namely a discontinuity in leadership at a very inconvenient moment. In verse 16, this idea of דְּוֹר is resumed by the words וְלִכְל־בָּהֶן יֵחִי וְעַל־יָהֶם.⁹ I read יֵחִי as a subordinate clause to עַל־יָהֶם.¹⁰ Thus, the sentence arises: *because of them who live, and for each in them*.¹¹ Using these words, Hezekiah means both the entire community (עַל־יָהֶם יֵחִי) and each individual in it (וְלִכְל־בָּהֶן).

Further, the construction רֵעִי אֹהֶל (ב) (verse 12) is differently interpreted. Two interpretations are current. The noun רֵעִי is read as an indefinite singular רֵעָה and is accordingly understood as (*as*) *a shepherd's tent*.¹² Other exegetes read רֵעִי as רַעִים

⁴ Because of the limitation of Hezekiah's recovery and, considering the continuation of the book of Isaiah in Isa 39 as well as the continuation of Israel's history in a (Babylonian) exile still to come, the sign is striking, as the evening follows the morning again.

⁵ Thus wrongly: J.A. ALEXANDER, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, Vol. II, s.l. 1875² (= Grand Rapids 1976), 82; F. DELITZSCH, *Biblischer Commentar über den Propheten Jesaja* (BC III/1), Leipzig 1879³, 376; O. KAISER, *Der Prophet Jesaja. Kapitel 13-39* (ATD 18), Göttingen 1973, 316; R. DE VAUX, *Les Institutions de l'Ancien Testament*, Paris 1 (1961⁴) 30; H. WILDBERGER, *Jesaja. Kapitel 28-39* (BKAT X/3), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982, 1442-1443.1460.

⁶ Pace: G. GESENIUS, *Thesaurus philologicus criticus linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti*, Lipsiae 1 (1835) 331; *KB*, 206; *HAL* 1 (1967) 209.

⁷ Confer: H.S. NYBERG, *Hiskias Danklied Jes. 38,9-20*, *ASTI* 9 (1973) 90-91; *THAT* 1 (1978) c. 444-445 [G. GERLEMAN].

⁸ The *versiones* support this interpretation, as the Septuagint translates ἐκ τῆς συγγενείας μου, the Vulgate *generatio mea* and the Pešitta ܘܕܝܢܐ, and especially the Targum that reads ܘܒܢֵי דְרִי (ב).

⁹ Pace: KAISER (1973) 316 who emendates verse 16 in such a way that only the word יֵחִי is kept; WILDBERGER (1982) 1140 who deletes large parts of verse 16.

¹⁰ It is not obligatory, certainly not in poetic texts, to introduce subordinate clauses by וְאֲשֶׁר; see: W. SCHNEIDER, *Grammatik des biblischen Hebräisch*, München 1985⁶ (1974¹), 174 (§ 45.5.1).

¹¹ Confer also: NYBERG (1973) 94.

¹² Thus: ALEXANDER (1875) 82; DELITZSCH (1879) 376.

and subsequently translate with (*as*) *shepherd's tents*.¹³

In a *status-constructus*-construction, however, the first word is in *statu absoluto* and, therefore, can never have a suffix. If this word should have a suffix because of the semantic meaning, the suffix is connected to the word in *statu constructo*.¹⁴ The expression בְּאֹהֶל רֹעִי, therefore, means: *as my shepherd's tent*.

The third problematic word in verse 12 is the verbal form קָפַרְתִּי. The two most occurring translations of this *hapax legomenon* are *to cut off*¹⁵ and *to roll up*.¹⁶ The interpretation *to cut off*¹⁷, however, is not suitable to the context: who cuts off his own life? Only an alteration of the first person into a second person (קָפַרְתָּ) could bring relief.¹⁸

If the meaning *to roll up* is chosen, the metaphor is interpreted as rolling up a cloth by a weaver after the cloth has been finished.¹⁹ This idea, however, causes two text-semantic problems. First, the image and that what is compared, do not match, because Hezekiah's life cannot be considered as finished, certainly not in view of the situation. Moreover, the metaphor itself is not coherent, because the order of the act of weaving is inaccurate: first a textile must be cut off from the cloth-beam and, after that, it can be rolled up.²⁰

In my view, however, the interpretation *to roll up* is correct, but it should be understood within the weaving-metaphor.²¹ That which is rolled up, is a textile which, because of the weaving by the weaver, has to be rolled up further all the time round the cloth-beam (דְּלָה). The I-figure, as a weaver, rolls up his textile, i.e. his life, round the cloth-beam, lengthening his piece of textile. Somebody else, however, a third person singular (יִבְצַעֲנִי), interrupts this activity by all at once cutting off the textile from the

¹³ Thus: KAISER (1973) 315; WILDBERGER (1982) 1443. They may feel supported by the Vulgate (*tabernaculum pastorum*).

¹⁴ Compare, for instance, the expression קָדְשֵׁי הַר in Isa 11:9: *my holy mountain*. See: P. JOÜON — T. MURAOKA, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (SubBib 14), Roma 1991, 520 (§ 140 b).

¹⁵ The Septuagint (ἐκτεμείν) and the Vulgate (*praecisa est*) also give this interpretation.

¹⁶ The Targum uses both verbs: קָצַץ and קָפַל.

¹⁷ Confer also the Pešitta which uses the verb מִפְּסָה מִפְּסָה שֵׁר מִפְּסָה.

¹⁸ Confer for this remark also: ALEXANDER (1875) 82. This change in the text-syntactical category 'number' occurs in the translation *to roll up* as well; *pace*: KAISER (1973) 316; WILDBERGER (1982) 1461.

¹⁹ Thus: ALEXANDER (1875) 82; DELITZSCH (1879) 376; GESENIUS 3 (1853) 1225; KB, 845; HAL 3 (1983) 1043; WILDBERGER (1982) 1461.

²⁰ L. ALONSO SCHOEKEL — J.L. SICRE DIAZ, *Profetas. Introducciones y comentario*, Madrid I (1980) 260, therefore, proposed the translation *to reel*. Reeling, however, is an activity that takes place before the actual act of weaving. Moreover, this activity-comparison is not suitable for someone who is in the midst of his life.

²¹ Some exegetes wrongly understand the weaver's metaphor as a metaphor of the thread of life, presumably influenced by the Moirai of Greek mythology, especially Atropos who cut off the thread of life. See for instance: J. SCHETS, *De profetie van Isaïas* (De heilige boeken van het Oude Verbond 6), 's-Hertogenbosch 1933, 157.

explicit anywhere in the story. From the fact that Hezekiah also shows his armoury (כָּל־בַּיִת בְּלִי), it can be concluded that military motives play a role.

The verb רָאָה plays a negative role here as well. It is prominently present in the story: twice in verse 2, once in the question of the prophet Isaiah in verse 4 and twice in Hezekiah's answer also in verse 4. It may here best be described as *to covet, to look at something in order to possess it* (confer for this nuance also: Gen 13:14; Dt 3:27; 32:48-52; 34:1-4; Mt 4:8-9; Lc 4:5-6; 14:18).²⁸

Finally, Hezekiah's reaction to Isaiah's words in the verses 5-7. This reaction, in verse 8, can be divided into two parts. The translation of the first part טוב דְּבַר־יְהוָה causes no problems; but the question what is called 'good' by Hezekiah, is, however, differently answered. The expression טוב דְּבַר־יְהוָה is unique in the Hebrew bible (only used in the 'parallel' text 2 Ki 20:19). In my opinion, however, the qualification טוב has not so much to do with the content of Isaiah's word,²⁹ or with Hezekiah's self-interest,³⁰ but with the fact that it simply is a word on the part of God.³¹

The second part of Hezekiah's reaction begins with the conjunction כִּי. This does not introduce a wishful remark, as the combined particle אִם הֲלוֹא in 2 Ki 20:19 does.³² It is true that the particle כִּי refers to the words טוב דְּבַר־יְהוָה, but, because of the division caused by a renewed וַיֹּאמֶר, it does not indicate a (selfish) approval of the content of Isaiah's words, but the correctness of Isaiah's formulation.

The word יוֹם plays a very important role here. This word has already occurred twice in the utterance of God which Isaiah put into words: the future is phrased in the expression הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים in verse 6a, whilst, in verse 6d, the prepositional phrase עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה indicates the past. The time span between these two יוֹם-moments is filled in by Hezekiah by his use of the word יוֹם.^{33 34}

²⁸ See also: P.R. ACKROYD 27 (1974) 339-341.

²⁹ Pace: THAT 1 (1978) c. 656 [H.J. STOEBE] who classifies Isa 39:8 as 'positive advice'.

³⁰ Pace: WILDBERGER (1982) 1479.

³¹ Confer: SWEENEY (1996) 506. Confer also: Prov 15:23.

³² Pace: ACKROYD (1974) 336-337. The Targum (אֲרִי יְהִי שְׁלָם וּקְשׁוּמַת בִּיּוֹמִי) and the Vulgate (*et dixit fiat tantum pax et veritas in diebus meis*), however, seem to adhere to this interpretation.

³³ Confer also: WILDBERGER (1982) 1479.

³⁴ I would like to thank Drs. Maurits J. Sinninghe Damsté (Amsterdam) for the correction of the English of this article.